

Looking Back to Colonial Times: Austin Clarke's Idiosyncratic Way of Remembering Places on Barbados

Judit Molnár

Austin Clarke, a black West Indian from Barbados, left the island in 1955 at the age of 21 before it gained independence in 1966. He says: "When Barbados became independent, I was not in Barbados but I had always felt independent because [...] we were in the majority. [...] We had a situation where not only whites and blacks, but all people were able to live as one" (1990). Despite the fact he lived in a colonized space he does not recall it as something that he suffered from; yet his emotional rootedness is in the colonial tradition. He confirms: "[...] I am Barbadian by nature—the best of me is Barbadian; the best of my memories are Barbadian" (1990). However, the title he gave to what he calls "a memoir" is *Growing Stupid Under the Union Jack* (1980), and it is a critique of the colonial system. Clarke has often been seen as doing pioneering work in this respect: "[he] laid the groundwork for West Indian writing in Canada (Kaup 172); "[he] has become Canada's first major black writer" (Algoo-Baksh 13).

His memoir written in a realist tradition is a good example of "effective remembering". Dawn Thompson firmly asserts: "If identity resides anywhere it resides in memory" (59). It is the adult Clarke, who looks back on his early childhood and adolescent years during World War II. His transformative years were closely connected to the schools he attended, and the church. The novel's basic theme is education. Because the very schools and the church he attended become for Clarke the sites of pedagogy of the colonial situation, I want to focus on the function of these places in his fiction. First, I elaborate on these *places*, the way they form a *space* and then I move onto the specificities of the surroundings.

It was only through “proper” education that one could move up on the caste-ridden society of Barbados, and Clarke happily complied with his mother’s wish: “Go ‘long, boy and *learn!* Learning going make you into a man” (5). His mother did not want him to miss out on what she could never have, hence her wholehearted support. In his discursive narrative, built on association rather than chronology, we move in and out of different educational institutions and the church. The British school-system that was imported to Barbados and the Anglican Church have had long-lasting effects on Clarke. After St. Matthias Boys’ Elementary School, he was admitted to the prestigious Combermere School, Barbados oldest secondary school established in 1695. Having left the unhappy primary school where flogging was at the centre of his school experience, Clarke happily immersed himself in Western culture studying Latin, French, and British history. Years later, he clearly saw the one-sidedness of the knowledge he acquired in Barbados. I knew all about the Kings; the Tudors, Stuarts and Plantaganets; and the war of the Roses; but nothing was taught about Barbados. We lived in Barbados, but we studied English society and manners. (80) Clarke’s devotion to the literary history of Britain became stronger and stronger. He lived through the important events in the history of the Empire: “I was not a ‘History Fool’: I just loved and cherished my past in the *History of England* book” (81). As Lloyd W. Brown points out the word “fool”: “[in] the Creole usage [...] implies an awesome expertise. [...] it also voices the colonial deference to the colonizer’s culture” (15). The application of the ambiguous meaning of the word serves also as an example of the binary cultural oppositions embedded in Clarke’s early experiences. Clarke was not a “history fool” but a “dreaming fool” (159). According to Bill Ashcroft: “[e]ducation, and literary education in particular, has been a major theme and contestation in postcolonial literatures” (“The Post-colonial” 425). Milton was always dear to him; incidentally even his best friend is also called Milton. He was thoroughly familiar with *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, thus Brown sees a connection in Clarke’s wish to explode the two myths: one associated with the Caribbean as Paradise and the other with the New World as El Dorado. (121) Both of them are, however, only *imaginary spaces*. Brown clearly demonstrates the falseness of these believes. He claims:

Nothing has more forcefully emphasized the fallacy of a Caribbean Paradise than an islander’s stubborn quest for their economic and social

El Dorado: In the Panama Canal Zone at the turn of the century; Great Britain after the Second World War; the United States over the last forty years; and Canada since the fifties. (2)

The image of a possible El Dorado in the New World often vanishes when immigrants face the harsh reality of the society where they hoped to fulfill their dreams and instead find themselves culturally, socially, and politically suppressed.

Clarke's schooling is also inseparable from the institution from the Anglican Church, which was equally complicit in the colonial play of power. Students studied intensely the Scripture, prayed from the *Book of Common Prayers*, and he sang enthusiastically in the church choir, too. It was not by accident that the school building and the smaller church—among coconut palms—were located side by side, separated only “by a thick wall” (27). When they were singing at school: “[t]he school had become a church” (7). Algoo points out: “The Anglican church also gained in significance from its connection with the school system, a nexus symbolized by the *physical proximity* of school and church” (148; emphasis added). The church and the school functioned in a similar way during the war to which there are constant references; kids painted the names of German generals and swastikas on the wall of the church (43) and the school became very similar to a “concentration camp” (47). The Anglican Cathedral was big and looked grandiose; it was “[i]n Town, in the capital, and that added to its charm and importance” (124). There were other churches there that differed from the Anglican one not only in their ceremonies and the tenets they taught but also in their physical appearances. Clarke says about the Church of the Nazarene: “It was slotted at the lower end of the religious ladder” (125). It looked very shabby: “The Church of the Nazarene was a one-room, broken down rocking institution” (125). This topologizing of memory is significant in the text. As Kort notes, “While we also remember things as having occurred at certain times, we remember more closely *where* they occurred. In fact, early memories are ‘*housed*’; they are distinguished from and related to another more by *space* than by time” (167; emphasis added). For as Edwards Casey puts it: “[p]laces are congealed scenes for remembered contents; and as such they serve to situate what we remember” (189).

Clarke's mother attended this latter church and allowed the congregation to use their living room to hold their prayer meetings there.

(128) (The living room together with the vestry where, ironically enough the adolescent Clarke is initiated into sinfulness through stealing, can both be considered private and sacred places.) In-between these two churches, the Anglican Cathedral and the Church of the Nazarene, there was the AME church for middle-class people. It “[w]as larger, with walls washed in white pain—the colour of grandness and purity” (96).

The fragmented nature of the society of Barbados was reflected in its spatial layout. The town was basically divided into two parts: the upper and the lower parts; the former inhabited by the rich and the latter by the poor: “[Clarke] demonstrates the pervasiveness of class in society employing the *topography* of the land to suggest the caste-like rigidity of the social structure” (Algoo 147; emphasis added). Clarke’s family also moved up *Flagstaff Hill* to build a bigger house that they kept enlargening bit by bit. They also rented some land to cultivate. On their way up, they passed the rum shop, the Bath Corner, where some older students used to gather to discuss politics. Yet even this is not an ideologically neutral place; the daily rituals of colonization are implicit even in the smallest gestures. The staff on the road was used to raise and pull down the Union Jack each and every day. (71) After all, “[they] were the English of Little England. Little black Englishmen” (56).

Clarke describes the people in the new neighbourhood and the houses at length. (91–97) Further away, *Belleville Avenue* “a showpiece of [his] country” (193) with its “colonial charm” (193) was a “reference point” (197). On one side, is *Carrington Village* where the poor live and on other side, by way of extreme contrast, the rich. The *Governor’s house* is a veritable monument to colonial, white supremacy: “The queen was safe and sound in Buckingham Palace, and the Governor in Government House sipping Scotch and soda” (182). In *St. Matthias* it was the *Marine Hotel* that divided people; it became a sign for social discrimination. “On Old Year’s Night” (33) the white were enjoying themselves inside while the black were dancing outside because the “Marine was ‘blasted’ serrigated” (sic) (34). Since it was not safe for people like Clarke to walk on *Belleville Avenue*; he took refuge in the drugstore, where he could hide himself and watch this part of the town. James Ferguson notes:

“[Clarke] describes in detail his many walks on sunny afternoons along *Hastings* main road when the sun scorched the bottom of his feet leaving tar mark on the surface. He describes how quiet the area was in those days, with hardly anyone walking the streets or any vehicular traffic. He would always walk slowly as he approached the *drug store* for that was

one of his favourite *places* where he stood outside and surveyed the place, looking at the sweets on display and inhaling the various potent medicines and of course the Lysol. (3; emphasis added)

Ferguson draws our attention to the importance even of naming in colonial space: “[p]laces with names like *Hastings* and *Worthing* were tropical replicas of Home County retirement resorts” (1; emphasis added). The social divisions between various places could be found even up on *Flagstaff Hill*. When Clarke opened the window of his bedroom he had a commanding view of this space that was permeated by colonial hierarchies. One group of the houses were painted in many colours and had names like *Labour Blest*, *In God We Trust*, *The Cottage*, *Flagstaff Castle*, while the other group of houses were pure white and “carried signs *Beware of Dog* or *Trespassers Will be Persecuted*” (151). Social discrimination was visible here, too. He could see the *hidden plantation house*, too surrounded by wooden, moveable *chattel houses* in which working class people lived in plantation days. (150; emphasis added) Algoo concludes: “The achievements and acquisitions of the whites became the hallmarks of respectability, representing wealth and power, [it] was the symbol of black ambition” (148). Because of its wealth and importance this “magnificent” (150) edifice had to be hidden and protected against possible intruders.

The islanders had different ways of getting away from the exhausting everyday routine. The adults could go to the *Garrison Pasture* enjoying horse races; it “[w]as also known as a place where men and women did ‘things’ at night, when the moon wasn’t shining” (27). When children wanted to have fun they went either to the *Gravsend* (sic) *Beach* or played in the *sugar cane fields*. These places became spaces of liberation. As Yi-Fu Tuan asserts: “Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being *free*. *Freedom implies space*; it means having the power and enough room in which to act” (“Space” 52; emphasis added). The *beach* and the *sea* provided Clarke with the expanse of a limitless horizon: And I think of a line in a poem, written about a boy I do not know and may never meet, on this beach or elsewhere, who *stood in his shoes and he wondered, he wondered; he stood in his shoes and he wondered...* (157; emphasis original) It was lovely to walk in the *sugar cane fields* when the cutting season came; they could enjoy all the odours, the fresh air, the open blue skies. They were away from home, the “accustomed territory” (108). “Sometimes we would play in the thick

canes of green waves [...]” (109); it filled them with joy. They secretly spied upon young lovers hiding among the canes.

The streets back in town form a pattern of a spider’s web for they were originally built for animals. (202) This is where everyday life continues and where you are watched by Sir Conrad Reeves, the first black Chief Justice of Barbados, the son of a slave woman whose statute stands outside the *House of Assembly*. The insignia of the royal coat of arms behind and above him cannot be missed. After all Barbados is part of the empire and this is firmly inscribed on the students’ minds at school. The teacher with the map in his hand says:

“‘What my hands passing over, now boys?’

‘The *British Empire*, sir!’

They know, as I know it, *with their eyes shut*.”

(46; emphasis added)

The map used at school is an important spacial document not to be left unnoticed. It is not surprising that in the end Clarke longs to pursue his studies in Great Britain. At that time: “Canada was not talked about: it existed only in apples. It was a blur on our consciousness” (31). In order to be able to do so he had to know the answers to exam questions set in England because that decided his life in Barbados.

Yet, despite this desire for an elsewhere, Clarke’s detailed description of Barbados leaves us with the conflicted image of a place where: “The home and village abandoned with love and pride” (Algoo 149).

Works Cited

- Algoo-Baksh, Stella. *Austin C. Clarke: A Biography*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1984.
- Aschroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Brown, Llyod. *El Dorado and Paradise*. London (Ont.): Centre for Social and Humanistic Studies, 1989.
- Casey, Edwards. *Remembering a Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Clarke, Austin. *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack: A Memoir*. 1980. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2005.

- , Interview. *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Ed. Hutcheon Linda and Marion Richmond. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990. 63–70.
- Ferguson, James. “Little England Behind You.” *Caribbean Beat*. [http://www.amazon.ca/ Growing-Stupid-Under-Union-Jack/dp/06769771598](http://www.amazon.ca/Growing-Stupid-Under-Union-Jack/dp/06769771598)
- Kaup, Monika. “West Indian Canadian Writing: Crossing the Border from Exile to Immigration.” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 57 (1995): 33–42.
- Thompson, Dawn. “Technologies of Ethnicity.” *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1995) 51–69.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977. Rpt. 1997.